Thank you to the South Asian Bar Association of Georgia for hosting tonight's event and for uplifting the great work of Raksha, led by the legendary Aparna Bhattacharyya, doing the challenging work on the ground everyday, and being recognized this evening.

As an Atlanta native born and raised here, I am honored to be back in my hometown. I'm joined tonight by my parents and my partner. My parents moved to Atlanta in 1981 from Chicago and became part of a growing and tightly-knit South Asian community, which is now one of the largest in the entire nation. This is the community that nurtured me and I will be forever grateful.

About SAALT

South Asian Americans Leading Together or SAALT is the only national, staffed, non-profit, non-partisan organization representing the South Asian American community. **SAALT's mission is to fight for racial justice and advocate for the civil rights of all South Asians in the United States.** We recently shifted our mission statement as part of our new three-year strategic plan to make an explicit commitment to not only serving the most marginalized in our community, but to a the larger movement for racial justice. Our strategies include advocating for just and equitable public policies at the national and local level; strengthening grassroots South Asian organizations as catalysts for community change; and informing and influencing the national dialogue on trends impacting our communities.

As some of you may know, SAALT was formed in the aftermath of crisis after the attacks of 9/11. South Asian Americans immediately became the targets of hate violence as many of our fellow Americans sought backlash against us, especially those of us who actually were or were perceived to be Muslim. And, for the first time many of us understood what it meant to be a person of color in this country, and what it means to be racialized in a country like the United States where discrimination has been historically reserved for Native, Black, and Latino populations, something unfortunately that our community was largely complacent with.

Deepa Iyer and a group of dedicated South Asian American leaders formalized the creation of SAALT shortly after 9/11 to help address this violence, but also finally shape a public South Asian American political identity. And, one of the most important components of this was establishing the National Coalition of South Asian Organizations or NCSO, which came together during the first SAALT

summit in 2007. Starting out as less than 30 organizations, including Raksha, which was established nearly a decade before SAALT, the NCSO has doubled to 56 community-based organizations today. The NCSO is the bedrock of SAALT's work as it is the NCSO who helped shape SAALT's policy goals by developing a national action agenda nearly a decade ago to (1) raise awareness about the needs of South Asians in the United States; (2) insert issues affecting South Asians into local, state, and national dialogues; (3) guide future policy recommendations; (4) increase public understanding of the depth and scope of our community's needs; and (5) enhance ongoing and future advocacy, organizing, and educational efforts. Issues in the National Action Agenda range from civil rights to gender justice to LGBTQ rights.

Our Work Today

Unfortunately, today's political environment is an assault on all civil rights issues. From the dismantling of our healthcare system earlier this month jeopardizing healthcare coverage for at least 24 million Americans to the politically motivated recent resignation of the Census Director on the verge of major changes to improve data collection in our communities, to the appointment of Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach as head of a national "voter fraud" commission that fabricates a problem that does not exist while diminishing the real threat of voter intimidation and voter restriction laws springing up all over the country. And, of course the surge in hate violence against our communities accompanied by the proliferation of racial profiling policies not the least of which has been the Muslim Ban executive order, which was appealed in the 4th and 9th circuits this month. ALL of our civil rights are under attack.

Over time, SAALT has developed expertise and focus on advocating for policy change on issues of civil rights, immigrant rights, and combating hate violence. For years, and especially over the last 18 months, the urgent and disturbing issues of hate violence and xenophobic political rhetoric have deeply affected our communities.

a. In our latest report, *Power, Pain, Potential*, we documented over 200 incidents of hate violence and xenophobic political rhetoric aimed at South Asian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Arab, and Middle Eastern Americans during the 2016 election cycle (November 2015 – November 2016) in an online database that also allows people to report acts of violence they have experienced or witnessed. We have been connecting those people with legal support through the South

Asian Bar Association of North America who immediately reaches out to state chapters like yours to find pro-bono legal counsel.

b. The 200+ incidents reflect a 34% increase in less than a third of the time covered in our 2014 report, *Under Suspicion, Under Attack*. Notably, over 20% of the xenophobic political rhetoric we tracked came from then-candidate Donald Trump, and 95% of all incidents were motivated by anti-Muslim sentiment.
c. Since the inauguration we've seen continued violence against our communities, including the tragic shootings in Kansas and Washington State, mosque arsons nationwide, vandalism of South Asian American homes across the country, and the ongoing humiliation and intimidation of our communities.
d. In just the past few weeks we saw four Indian Americans killed in various incidents across the country, including a store owner in Modesto, California, a tech executive and his wife in San Jose, and a urologist in Detroit. With the climate of hate being what it is, SAALT has demanded that law enforcement investigate whether any of these incidents were racially motivated.
e. Policies such as the Muslim ban executive orders have fanned the flames of this increasing hate against our communities, and we've seen that it is enough to be perceived as Muslim to be a target of attack.

The backdrop of this violence is the fact that South Asian Americans are the most rapidly growing demographic group in the U.S., numbering over 4.3 million, with increasing representation in the South where 30% of our communities currently reside. The South Asian population in the South has doubled in size since the year 2000 going from half a million to over one million. The South is also where we found the largest spike in hate violence against our communities. A few examples from GA in the last year:

Islamic Center in Savannah threatened with a letter saying "Trump is going to do to you Muslims, what Hitler did to the Jews."

Hundreds of people protested a local Muslim community's plan to build a mosque in Covington.

A Muslim teacher at Dacula High School in Gwinnet County just outside Atlanta was left an anonymous note telling her that her headscarf is not allowed anymore and to hang herself with it, among other things.

None of these would qualify has hate crimes because they do not meet the legal FBI threshold for what is considered a hate crime. But, these acts of intimidation, violence, and harassment are part of a larger culture of racism in this country that has intensified since the election of this president. Our report also makes the necessary connections between political rhetoric and policies and the violence we are seeing on the ground. For example, one of our partners Rethink Media released poll findings in 2016 indicating that most Americans are appalled or at the very least reject anti-Muslim rhetoric. However, when show discriminatory policies such as extra airline security measures for Muslims or passengers perceived to be Muslim, most respondents believed that was acceptable. This disconnect reveals that the American public may reject discrimination in theory but largely accepts it in practice. And, to take it one step further, a California State University study explores the connection between political rhetoric and anti-Muslim hate crimes. After George W. Bush made statements of tolerance at a mosque just days after 9/11, anti-Muslim hate crimes dropped over 50% in the week following. On the other hand, anti-Muslim hate crimes increased by an astounding 87.5% in the days directly following President Trump's speech after the San Bernardino attacks when he called for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" or basically a Muslim ban.

SAALT has responded in the last several months through organizing and supporting numerous public events such as a Know Your Rights Town Hall in Washington DC, the first of many community town halls we will organize throughout the country this year; a vigil mourning the victims of hate violence on the steps of the Capitol, where Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal and Congressmen Ami Bera, Ro Khanna, and Joe Crowley lent their support; a Congressional briefing on hate violence where SAALT was joined by eight members of Congress and community partners in an urgent discussion on combating the surge in hate violence aimed at our communities in the US; and just last month we hosted the 10 year anniversary of the National South Asian Summit, where hundreds of organizations, activists, and individuals from across the country gathered in Washington DC for four days to share, teach, learn, and rally on the need for justice for South Asian American communities across a spectrum of issues, including civil rights, immigration, and hate violence.

What Can You Do?

It's easier for us as a national organization at SAALT with resources and a mandate to actively address these issues. But, I know it is more challenging to

understand what we can do as individuals or what we can do in communities that have few resources and political will like in the South. I spent several years in New Orleans, Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina working with community leaders and organizations with extremely limited resources in a harsh political climate led by Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal for years, but the depth of change they created was unimaginable. Leaders there took on the prison industrial complex by fighting to ensure that the Orleans Parish Prison, which incarcerated more people per capita than any prison in the country would not expand, they created unprecedented multi-racial coalitions between Black, Latino, and Asian-American communities, and they fought for participatory budgeting so they could see how federal relief money meant for the most affected neighborhoods after Hurricane Katrina was actually being allocated.

Yes, the state of Georgia is a tough political environment to enact progressive policy change, but our community unlike so many others has abundant resources that we must leverage. The tremendous work of Raksha is an extraordinary example of this work. They provide direct services, legal advocacy, and economic empowerment all while building community continuously here in Atlanta and for the entire state of Georgia. They were also critical in fighting for the family members of H-1B visaholders, many whom hold H-4 visas, receive work authorization, which was finally granted under President Obama and now being threatened in court by the Trump administration, which is working to strip as many immigrants of their rights as possible whether it's through bans, walls, raids, or work authorization. Raksha has been doing the work of connecting service to community building to policy change allowing us to see that domestic violence is more than a cultural issue, but one that is deeply connected to immigration policy and gender justice.

Recognizing, funding, and supporting organizations like Raksha is one of the most important things we can do.

What else can we do as individuals?

Often times we want to know what actions we can take as individuals, but contributing as an individual does not mean we act in isolation. It's tempting to think that one great idea or one key lawsuit can solve our problems, but change is won by thinking and acting collectively. So in that spirit we offer multiple ways to plug into our work at SAALT. There are internships, youth leadership programs like our Young Leaders Institute, volunteer projects, community building programs, independent projects, and of course we always appreciate donations, but I think the most important opportunity we provide is connecting you to our National Coalition

of South Asian Organizations' partners like Raksha who are all over the country. Contributing to the foundation they have already laid in cities across the country is the single most effective way to be involved.

Exercise Your Power

Most of this room is full of attorneys and attorneys have great power in making a difference and ensuring that it is codified into law in a best case scenario but also consistently ensuring that the way we interpret our laws serves the best interests of the people. That is more important now than ever with a federal administration that is passing executive order after executive order, many of which are skirting the boundaries of constitutionality. Just this month, the Muslim Ban is being appealed in court. Our courts are the last line of defense at this time and it is critical that we can count on them to uphold our civil rights.

All of us cannot and would not be good community organizers so it is important that we exercise our power within our professions. Doctors and businesspeople have a role to play too. This is not to discourage anyone from being a community organizer because we certainly need more of those in our community!

But, we can all utilize the agency and expertise we do have to question practices and systems and demand they be fair, equitable, and bring dignity for us all. It is critical that physicians speak out against policies like the latest healthcare law passed in the U.S. House of Representatives. It is because business leaders were vocal about the impact of this administration's immigration executive orders and policies that they are being appealed in the courts today. Opposition from business leaders is also why several Religious Freedom Restoration Acts that popped up in various states across the country a few years ago were eventually defeated. The bills essentially gave business owners license to refuse service to people because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression under the cover of religious freedom.

This just illustrates that everyone has a role to play.

Support Local Movements

Many of you may also know that this administration is threatening to take away critical community development funding from cities and states who refuse to cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement or ICE agents, also known as sanctuary cities. For example, if an undocumented immigrant is reporting a

crime or has been cheated out of their wages and report it to local police, that police officer would not ask for their immigration status or detain them and notify Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This administration is going after sanctuary cities through one of its executive orders on immigration and through legislation in Congress,

But, right here in Georgia, the city of Clarkston just outside Atlanta has joined the counteroffensive that is being waged by cities across the country against President Donald Trump's immigration enforcement policies. Clarkston's City Council decided unanimously last week to limit the city's cooperation with federal deportation officers, becoming the first city in Georgia to pass a resolution limiting its cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The resolution, approved and signed by Mayor Ted Terry, states law enforcement officials in Clarkston "shall not arrest, detain, extend the detention of, transfer custody of, or transport anyone solely on the basis of an ICE 'detainer request." Mayor Terry said that ICE can't bully New York or San Francisco, but they thought they could probably bully a small, little town.

Clarkston's City Council decided to take the vote following raids conducted by ICE both at homes and businesses in the city. In this case ICE was specifically targeting Somali immigrants. Folks may remember this follows a series of immigration raids during the 2016 holiday season that targeted Central American children and families right here in Georgia.

This victory is part of a larger campaign called the “Sanctuary for All” movement being led by Project South here in Atlanta along with ally organizations. I encourage everyone to check out their work and support this effort.

However, just last month, Georgia Governor Nathan Deal signed a measure into law that would cut off state funding to Georgia colleges that declare themselves “sanctuary campuses” in defiance of President Trump’s immigration policies. Students and faculty from hundreds of universities across the country have called on their administrators to declare themselves sanctuaries after Trump’s election, partly in hopes of helping the “Dreamers” or students who are here under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program established by President Obama which would give them temporary reprieve from the threat of deportation.

There is no shortage of work and organizations like Project South are great movement builders we should all be supporting.

Have Difficult Conversations

Lastly, we need to help lead and build political education in our communities. We cannot afford to play into the model minority stereotype and trope, which pits us against other communities of color and erases the marginalized among us, who are undocumented and working class. While our communities are facing hate crimes at an alarming rate, the visibility of our community in the mainstream media has largely been in the form of the Republican Hindu Coalition and the newly formed American Hindu Coalition, both of which are run by ardent Trump supporters and are galvanized around his anti-Muslim agenda. There are also the myriad South Asian American appointees in this administration like Seema Verma, the head of the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services, who was the chief architect behind the latest healthcare bill that will strip at least 24 million Americans of their healthcare access and then there is Ajit Pai, the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission who is currently spearheading the effort to terminate net neutrality, which is a basic principle that Internet service providers should enable access to all content and applications regardless of the source, and without favoring or blocking particular products or websites. And, of course we cannot forget Nikki Haley, the current U.S. ambassador and former Governor of South Carolina who ardently supported the Confederate flag flying over her capitol building until a massive groundswell of local resistance forced her to retract her position and take down the flag. These cannot be the institutions and representatives of our community that are guiding the future of this nation, undermining the well being of all communities of color.

In order to shift this tide, it requires having difficult and often uncomfortable conversations with our family, our peers, and our community. But, this is the important work that has to be done and SAALT and many of our partners have created resources that can help you hold these discussions so please seek them out.

This is a difficult political moment and it may seem that compromising and taking what we can get is the only possibility, but we did that in the Obama administration and even those minimal gains like the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which we accepted over true comprehensive immigration reform are being taken away at lightning speed. Building sustainable change that lasts beyond presidential administrations requires us to remain steadfast and hold the bar high even when they go low as our former first lady said. Just because they move the line on us does not mean we waver from our demands. We are the leaders we have been waiting for and we must be bold, grounded, strategic, and principled to create the change we all deserve.